

# Ducks in a Shooting Gallery: In the Absence of a National Strategy

Shmuel Harlap | February 15, 2026

Every strategy proposes a plan of action for changing the situation. In his book on strategy, Prof. Lawrence Freedman defines strategy as “the art of building power.” It is the ability “to get more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would permit.” At the same time, alongside strategies of “what to do” are prohibitions of “what not to do”: the Ten Commandments, the Code of Hammurabi in Mesopotamia, Islamic prohibitions on consuming alcohol and charging interest, and the imperative to prevent harm to noncombatants in war according to international law.

In contrast to the abundance of “do’s” and “don’ts,” the Danish prince in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* wrestles with a more fundamental existential question: “To be or not to be?” The philosopher Karl Marx offered a practical solution to this Hamletian dilemma. In *The Communist Manifesto*, he sought to turn the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel “on his head,” replacing philosophical preoccupation with consciousness with a historiosophical engagement with being. Marx developed the discourse on being into a historical discussion of class struggle. The theory and practice of class warfare led to the rise of communism in Europe and Asia.

At the beginning of the 20th century, philosophical engagement with “being” made a U-turn—from the collective to the individual. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who served as rector of the University of Freiburg in the 1930s, advocated what he termed “authentic life.” In the name of an “authentic life,” he joined the Nazi Party and never expressed remorse until his death in May 1976. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre took the “authenticity” of being a step further, developing his existentialist philosophy. In his view, existence precedes essence. In biblical terms, Adam and Eve existed and lived even before tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

Today, liberal democracy stands in opposition to authoritarian forms of governance: illiberal democracies in the West and top-down dictatorships in the East. The struggle between ideological camps over “being” is intertwined with a broader war over consciousness—narratives instead of truth; media and algorithms instead of facts.

Amid the abundance of ideologies of being and wars over consciousness, what stands out is the strategic absence of “what not to be.” In the field of national security, there is no literature addressing “what not to be.” As a result, the literature on national security overlooks a common and familiar experiential condition: passivity—or, in more colloquial terms, the state of being “ducks in a shooting gallery.”

Not being “ducks in a shooting gallery” is such an intuitive imperative that it seems self-evident: Who would willingly choose to be a sitting duck? Yet although no one chooses to be in such a situation, the residents of Israel stand helpless before enemies who threaten to destroy them and fire deadly ballistic missiles at the country’s communities.

As long as Iran targets Israel’s infrastructure and population centers with ballistic missiles, and Israel lacks the ability to prevent their launch, the state and its citizens are, in effect, ducks in a shooting gallery.

Accordingly, it is a supreme imperative to ensure that Israel’s citizens are not ducks in the crosshairs of Iranian missiles. This is the “what” of strategy. In other words, in Prof. Freedman’s terms, it is the ability to extract more than the initial situation of “ducks in a shooting gallery” would seem to allow.

If Israel’s leaders agree that the national security strategy must aim to prevent a situation of “ducks in a shooting gallery,” they must formulate a doctrine of warfare capable of achieving that objective. Formulating such a doctrine moves us into the realm of the “how”: How do we prevent Iran from turning Israel’s citizens into ducks in a shooting gallery? The government must decide on both the “what” and the “how.” That is its highest responsibility to the citizens of Israel.